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ABSTRACT

To explore families as networks and communities from an evolutionary perspective, two studies were conducted with rural elders in West Virginia. In the first study, examining the social factors that influenced the use of public transportation, 28 elderly individuals, divided into three groups by transportation styles (users of public transportation, users of public transportation along with rides provided by friends and relatives, and users of informal transportation networks) were interviewed. The findings suggested that the groups did not differ with regard to availability of children, friends, or other people who could provide transportation, but rather in the length of time they had used informal transportation networks. The early use of family networks significantly affected later use. In the second study, an ethnographic inquiry into the maintenance of the social status of elders in a rural church community, members of elderly families in the church were interviewed. Results showed that elders played significant roles in relationships with one another and maintained a high social status within the community. Factors which contributed to this status included shared commitment, church attendance, a history of participation and leadership, and principle roles in the church. Family relations significantly contributed to the maintenance of status through accumulated social credit across the life span and across generations. (BL)

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FAMILIES AS NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES: A DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY OF AGING AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The results of two investigations of the social networks of rural elderly are discussed in terms of intergenerational relations. Family and community relations are viewed in the context of the individual's lifetime and in relation to the question, What are the consequences of living long, with the same people, and often in the same place? The investigations demonstrate that the use of family networks early in life significantly affects the way they are used later in life. In addition, family relations contribute to maintenance of community status through accumulated social credit across the life span and across generations.

Time plays a critical, though often understated, role in the functioning of families, social support networks, and communities. When we study intergenerational relations, we naturally consider changes in family function across time as individual family members face new developmental tasks. When we study social support networks, however, we do not consider as naturally the evolution of networks across the individual's life; rather, it often appears in our studies that networks emerge for the sole purpose of meeting specific life crises. I would like to illustrate the way the social networks of old people evolve over the course of their lives, just as family relationships evolve. In turn, I would like to suggest ways we might expand the study of intergenerational relations by addressing the impact of family functioning beyond the boundaries of the family--that is, its impact on social support networks and communities.

I will explore families as networks and communities using as my focus a question that fosters an evolutionary perspective: What are the consequences of living long, with the same people and often in the same place? This question arose from two investigations I conducted with rural elders in West Virginia. The first was a study of the social factors that influence the use of a public transportation program for the elderly. The second was an ethnography dealing with the maintenance of social status among elders in a rural church community. These studies suggest ways in which social aspects of aging as diverse as the use of social programs and the maintenance

of community status are determined in part by intergenerational relations before the individual grows old.

West Virginia is a rural state in which transportation can be a major problem, particularly for the low-income elderly. In 1974 the state initiated a reduced-fare transportation stamp program (Transportation Remuneration Incentive Program--TRIP) for the low-income elderly and handicapped. Each month those eligible can purchase an $8.00 book of tickets for $3.00. These tickets can be used on any licensed and certified public vehicle--bus, taxi, train, or airplane.

An evaluation of the program conducted from 1975 to 1977 (Office of Research and Development, 1977) revealed that enrollment in the program had fallen far short of expectations: between 12 and 15 percent of those eligible for the program had actually enrolled. In addition to the usual problems associated with interventions of this kind, the evaluation revealed an extensive reliance on informal networks of transportation--transportation arrangements among friends, relatives, and neighbors.

In order to differentiate those who used the program from those who did not, I conducted in-depth exploratory interviews with 28 elderly individuals divided into three transportation style groups. All the respondents used both informal networks and public transportation; they were grouped according to the degree to which they relied on each form of transportation. The first group included those who were enrolled in the program and used public transportation for most of their travel. The second group included individuals who were

enrolled in the program but used public transportation less often than they rode with friends or relatives. The last group comprised individuals who were not enrolled in the program and used informal networks for most of their transportation.

The findings suggested that the groups did not differ with regard to availability of children, friends, or other people who could provide transportation. It was not uncommon, for example, to find a couple who relied on the bus, but whose children lived next door. Instead, the groups differed most in the length of time they had used informal transportation networks. The majority of those who relied primarily on informal networks had done so for more than 10 years. All of them had done so for at least five years. By contrast, the majority of those in the other groups had ridden with relatives and friends for only one to five years.

Within families, this difference reflects evolving intergenerational relations. One woman, for example, began to ride with her children as soon as they were old enough to drive, about 40 years ago. At the time of the interview, she was riding with her children and her grandchildren. Thus, for some of those who relied on informal networks, family transportation networks had not developed to meet the needs of an aging parent; they had developed to meet the needs of an entire family. Within these families, one could sense a continuity that was reflected in responses to questions about using public service programs in general. These services may augment family care, but they certainly could not replace it. Many had not felt the need for service programs because

"The family has always been there." Furthermore, those individuals would rather ask for help than pay for it.

Within the other groups, however, family networks evolved differently. Individuals in these groups marked the beginning of their use of informal transportation networks with changes they associated with age: sudden illness, declining health, or the death of a spouse. They were no more likely to have experienced these changes, they just did not have the history of reliance on informal networks found in the group that used those networks most extensively. In addition, individuals in these two groups were more afraid of dependence, particularly on their children: As one man told me, "We'd stay home all day rather than ask the kids for a ride."

This difference in the evolution of family relations was further illustrated by the difference between those who relied on public transportation for most of their travel and those who used it to supplement their informal networks. The latter group had fewer children, relied on them less, and had larger potential networks--people with whom they did not ride, but could if they needed to. Thus, those who relied on public transportation were more likely to face the unwelcome prospect of dependence on their children, many of whom were no more financially secure than the elders were. Again, one can sense a continuity. Individuals who relied on public transportation had been using that form of transportation before the TRIP program began; the lower cost made the program very attractive. In addition, those individuals reported that public programs could replace family care and that they would rather pay for help than ask for it.

One of the consequences of living along with the same people, then, is that the practices, expectations, and attitudes one carries into old age have evolved over time. The evolution of these practices, expectations, and attitudes affects one's use of the resources available to meet the changes of aging.

The second study was an ethnographic exploration of the social status of elders in a rural church community, their psychological engagement in the community, and the resources they provided others. I conducted interviews with members of all but three of the elderly families in the church. In addition, I interviewed church members identified by the elderly as people who were important in their lives. Finally, I sent questionnaires to individuals who had joined the church within the past five years.

Responses indicated that the elders played significant roles in relationships with one another and maintained a relatively high social status ranking within the community. Four factors contributed to this status maintenance. First, there was a shared commitment by all church members to the future of the community. Second, the elders' continued attendance in church kept them visible to the congregation. Third, the elders had a recognized history of participation and leadership in the community. Fourth, the elders played a principle role in the history and traditions of the church. It is that historical role that I would like to develop further in this paper.

The elders had strong family ties to the church. For example, some of the elders were descendants of the man who donated the land

for the church. Many of the elders had attended the church all their lives and also represented the middle of five generations of church members--grandparents, parents, elders, children, and grandchildren. Consequently, their frequent reference to their "family church" or their "community church" was based on an association of as long as 140 years.

In addition, recent history has reinforced the status of the elders in the community. In 1974, the minister, with the support of the congregation, withdrew the church from the statewide Methodist church, invoking a legal battle over the church property. In the conflict that resulted, most of the congregation went elsewhere, leaving a core group of the elders and their families. Their commitment to their "family church" was too strong for them to leave. After that, however, the church grew around the community of elders that remained, the elders remained active, and their children began to emerge as community leaders.

The status maintenance of the elders can be explained in part as an intergenerational flow of social credit--that is, a degree of social standing which permits a claim on community resources based on past rather than current activity (Lozier & Althouse, 1974; 1975). The elders in this community had accumulated social credit during their own lives. Moreover, they were drawing on social credit that was established in previous generations, through the participation, leadership, and attendance of their parents and grandparents. Finally, to a smaller degree, they were drawing on the social credit that their children were

beginning to accumulate as new leaders in the church. In addition to drawing on social credit, the elders had contributed to the social credit of their children, who anticipated growing old in the community in much the same way that their parents had.

Thus, one of the consequences of living long, with the same people, in the same place is that it permits the accumulation of social credit,not just over the course of the individual's life, but also across generations.

Conclusions

I have suggested that living long with the same people, and often in the same place, has important implications for intergenerational relations and for relations outside the family. The use of family networks early in life prepare one to meet the needs of aging with an established network. Family relations in communities contribute to the maintenance of social status through the accumulation of social credit across the life span and across generations.

Old people remain in close contact with their children throughout their lives and they also remain important to their children (Troll, Miller, and Atchley, 1979). Furthermore, 44 percent of those over the age of 60 in 1970 had lived in the same house for at least 20 years; another 25 percent had lived in the same house for 10 to 20 years. Although mobility is increasing among the elderly, they are still not as mobile as other age groups, and when they do move, it is often within the same county (Wiseman, 1978). Demographics suggest, then, that the

consequences of a long life, with familiar people, in a familiar setting are important issues for many old people.

An evolutionary perspective suggests important dimensions for social network analysis. Support networks do not arise spontaneously to meet crises. They accompany the individual across parts of the life course. How do networks originate and why? Most important, how do they change as the developmental tasks, needs, and abilities of their members change? Expanding the focus of intergenerational relations to include social networks and communities also implies changes in social service programs. An evolutionary perspective, considering the flow of resources across the life span and across generations, assumes that unique histories create a variety of practices, expectations, and attitudes among elders. Consequently, the success of those programs is not guaranteed when they are directed at a homogeneous group of elders. Neither is the success of the new volunteerism. This perspective suggests that we not ask, "Are there enough needy old people to support programs;" but rather we should ask, "What do people need and when do they need it?"

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